Research Group Dynamics with Critical Collaborative Creativity

Tim Murphey

Kanda University of International Studies

Contact: mitsmail1@gmail.com

Joseph Falout

Nihon University

Contact: researchdigest@gmail.com

Yoshifumi Fukada

Meisei University

Contact: fukayo2@hotmail.com

Tetsuya Fukuda

International Christian University

Contact: tetsuyafukuda2012@gmail.com

Researching alone can be a lonely journey hampered by limited resources and interactions, and thus many researchers turn to collaboration. But researching in groups can also become a journey impeded by false starts, roadblocks, disagreements, and uncoordinated follow-ups in the many messy stages of researching, writing, and submitting. However, when a group aligns itself with *critical collaborative creativity*, positive group dynamics can emerge with researchers saying what they truly believe without fear and the whole group benefiting from the critical perspectives that in other situations might not have been voiced. Such teams can be described as socially adaptive and critically creative, using such dialectic goal-directed processes as brainstorming, improvising, languaging, and playing. So, what is critical collaborative creativity more precisely?

CRITICAL highlights two characteristics of our working group. One is that we are always questioning things, the dogma in the world, and the growing dogma within each of us as to how things "have to be." The second is that we are continuously searching for the "critical" elements that help make education work. We think we have identified several critical elements for learning that lead our students toward effective, motivated learning.

COLLABORATIVE highlights not only our mutually directed effort toward group goals but the socialization that we believe makes learning environments so much more productive. We collaborate with our students as well as with each other and the wider academic community.

CREATIVITY comes from the freedom to play and explore, and it tends to happen in groups when the critical and collaborative are well established. If we feel like we belong to a group that accepts us and can collaborate enthusiastically, we are not afraid of being critical and questioning things, and then new, creative ideas and insights tend to emerge. The diversity of our lives also adds to the mix of ideas that bubble up from our discussions and rants. Note also that while our group seems to be working well, there are times when it does not work well, and we have our ups and downs. We hope that in describing what works for our team, we might help other groups develop more productively.

Critically, collaboratively, and creatively putting these three elements together illustrates the concept itself and opens our minds towards other possibilities. Words and the meanings we give them can guide us toward deeper and more ecological understandings of our working and learning lives. Critical collaborative creativity gives groups the imaginative resources, alternatives, and insightful discoveries that together inspire more research than when individuals are isolated. Important for attaining these pivotal moments is

that all of us do our own things for a while, and then come back and share and teach each other new things, and see how our evolving ideas might fit together. We are each a major part of each other's continuing education. We also see our own students as part of our extended research group, so we listen to our students seriously and involve them in our research efforts to help them learn better and teach us better.

Our collaborative projects eventually developed into papers in domestic and international vetted journals, and into book chapters with international publishers (see our publications at http://www3.hp-ez.com/hp/englisheducation/). In this paper we focus on the back-stories, narrating the other processes of critical collaborative creativity that we are so fortunate to have slowly emerging, and at times springing forth, from healthy group dynamics. We hope that our examples will encourage others to likewise experience prosperous researching in diverse groups.

Fractals of Interacting

We find a self-patterning in the formations of how we think, what we do, and whom we interact with as we research, teach, and live our lives. These self-patterns, or fractals, can be found across the micro and macro levels of social and conceptual networks in which we find ourselves engaging.

Synchronous brainstorming coffee rushes

Coffee houses sprang up along the frontline flow of the intellectual explosion across Europe in a period that became known as the Enlightenment (Johnson, 2010); ideas sprang forth when people met and drank coffee together in congenial environments called cafes. That is no surprise to us, as our research team gets our biggest inspirational boosts when we meet for coffee and heavy brainstorming sessions.

Asynchronous buddying online

With four team members, there is always someone online when one of us is in need, whether we are asking for advice, help with a research paper, or just plain information for a reference. For example, Yoshi recalls once receiving 27 email messages from the other members within a three-day scramble following a surprise request to prepare a manuscript for final submission. Such intensive collaborative work may arise at any time throughout the year, including mid-semester busy time, family weekends, extended holidays and—surprising to some people—even during New Year's Eve and New Year's Day.

Coordinating our work via asynchronous interactions is not always easy, but we have fallen into routines that help get the work done. For example, when we are all working on a paper, we use a call-it system. We send around a document file by email, and before anyone begins writing and revising, they say, "I got it," much like baseball players do to avoid diving into each other to catch the same fly ball.

Even when not asking for anything, we often give each other encouragement when we least expect it but most need it. Other cherished email moments include those time ticking-down times running towards submission deadlines. Especially for abstract proposals for important conferences or the final version of book chapters, the submitter can often rely on at least one other team member shadowing his progress though email postings. During the countdown, the other members provide comfort and support in back-channeling those nail-biting, last-minute decisions or second-guessing questions that are oftentimes unavoidable. Then, with the others having already politely signed off on the project, saying, "We trust you with the final decisions," the submitter dares to press the online send button. After that, the submitter then sends a brief confirmation to all, and the others usually respond with "well done," and "get some rest."

Alone journeying together

In our imaginations, we seem to carry as avatars in our minds, our colleagues, mates, family, and friends. Although they are not physically present, we seem to hear their voices as we ask, "What would they say?" So when one of us is writing alone, on either a team or solo project, we can channel into our presence, through our imaginations, one or several of the other group members, or someone else from our social networks in researching, or even someone we have never met, such as a researcher whose works we have long read and respected. This is called *imagined social capital* (Quinn, 2010), and using this for our benefit is what we might also call *mentally activated social capital*. For example, Joe was once experiencing writer's block, and he asked himself, "What would Tim write?" The words began to flow again, filling the page. In other instances, whenever Yoshi faces an accident in his researching, teaching, and also in his living, he is encouraged by remembering Tim's favorite comeback line, "Whatever happens will be interesting!" We believe that accessing our imagination is the most powerful thing that we have learned from one another and our research together.

Trust in Each Other

We find that the more we learn from each other and research together, the more we trust each other. This trust gives us the confidence and strength to forge ahead with our projects, especially when the purpose or goals become occluded. In other words, we

may sometimes feel lost, not knowing exactly why we are doing the research or where we are heading with it, but we stick together as a team, assured from our personal relationships, and beliefs in each other's abilities, that we will manage to find our way again. Joe saw this early on when he started researching with Tim and two other researchers (Jim and Mike). Sometimes Joe was not sure of where the research was going, or if the research team would be able to finish a paper within the necessary timeframe. Having trust that researching with Tim, whom Joe saw as a more experienced researcher, meant that Tim would know how to help the team achieve their goal. Joe believed, therefore, that Tim provided a kind of safety net, and, as long as the team worked diligently, Tim would also use all of his faculties to see that their efforts would get into print. This faith made us all work hard, resulting in teamwork that did not overly rely on Tim, which in hindsight seemed to make the ingredients of our successes; at some point or other, whether stated or tacit, someone was always ready to take the reigns of the study or the brunt of the work, and that helped us gain trust in working together as a team, with faith in each of the group members and in the team itself, as opposed to simply one member of it.

Sometimes one team member thinks they see the way, while the others feel blind, so we have faith in the one who takes the lead, and we band together, forging ahead into the dark, sometimes switching roles in leadership, until we all come to places where we agree we are seeing the same things. For example, early in our research, we found that correlations of students' senses of three different self-images with learning English—in their pasts, presents, and futures—all began to simultaneously strengthen with increasing interconnections across the period of one semester, studying in class together. Our team was not sure how to interpret the findings, what it meant, or how to express it. Joe, however, said he believed the correlations represented a "resonance," a word he could not help repeating at our research team meetings, and after further discussions, we all came to at least two understandings of these findings. One is what we call *holistic timing*, that each student's self-images of their pasts, presents, and futures can be tightly knit together, and become even more tightly knit for a stronger sense of self and purpose in learning, and another is what we call *group framing of motivation*, in which motivation can be transmitted, for better or worse, among members of a group, notably classmates, that express shared empathy and values. This happens through what is known as emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994) spreading throughout the group, when many of the members "catch" each other's enthusiasm or excitement, or even disaffection, such as when negativity toward classwork arises, against the teacher's hopes. Positive emotional contagion can result in measureable increases in motivation and palpable feelings of joyful learning. Likewise, for our research team, the more we work together, the more we respect each other and catch each other's optimism and zeal.

Trust and feelings of belonging to a group can inspire people to invest more in the work they do. This is precisely Tetsuya's individual research project. Feelings of belonging to groups, such as school, class, or even a club, can influence students positively (Fukuda, 2014). The concept of belonging and learning can be applied also to our own research team. This is another fractal pattern spinning out of our own small research group.

Students' past histories with learning languages and being in groups was captured by Joe's research with antecedent conditions of the learner (Falout, 2012), the foundation upon which we soft assembled *holistic timing* and *group framing of motivation*. People's pasts never cease influencing their presents and futures; we are learning that students' conceptions of their pasts can provoke novel and helpful interpretations, decisions, and actions in their presents and for their futures.

Yoshi, inspired by the team's previous qualitative research, conducted several critical ethnographic case studies in Hawaii during his sabbatical. After donning skim-boarding gear, to his surprise he found that others like him shared an *affinity space*, an environment for like-minded people to share their mutual likes and activities through English-mediated socialization (Fukada, 2015).

People all have expectations and projections, for better or for worse, of how they will behave toward each other, which in turn greatly influences their real-time interactions. We belong to our imaginations. When we do research with students, often with critical participatory looping and ideal classmates (Murphey, Falout, Fukuda, & Fukada, 2013), we have faith that our students can figure out what the data means, for us (their teachers), and more importantly, for themselves, because the changes will mostly be made within the students themselves, in the way that they learn and develop as speakers of English and as active social agents. We believe students have the first rights to the data about themselves. And if teachers listen carefully and long enough, the teachers can also understand what the students are figuring out for themselves. Teachers' learning what learners are learning is crucial for action research, and for effective education (Murphey, 1993).

Soft Assembly in Researching

When we began our *ideal classmates* research, we did not have a detailed research plan. We only knew that we wanted to start thinking about ideal classmates with our students. We needed to adjust, adapt, and improvise—or *soft assemble*—as we went along. So we soft assembled a question here, a procedure there, and our students' insights emerged. These insights about the kind of people they wanted to learn with became crucial to us.

The process of submitting research papers also does not always go by plan. When one of our papers got rejected, Joe immediately reformatted it and submitted it elsewhere. While waiting for a reply, Joe and Tim made lists of other potential journals to submit it to, and then over the following several months that paper made the rounds to more than a half dozen journals before two anonymous reviewers found merit in it. They recommended extensive revisions before final acceptance; nevertheless, our team had found a home for this paper to get published. During this time, Yoshi and Tetsuya were in awe of what seemed natural to Joe and Tim; first, to take lightly editorial rejections themselves, and secondly, to take seriously the reasons for rejections as positive input for

possibly improving the paper, and then to continue to submit to high-quality journals in the belief that someone will want it. Having spent many years as reviewers and editors themselves, Joe and Tim were aware that reviewers can make mistakes in their evaluations, and at the same time they can also provide invaluable advice to writers who are willing to listen and revise their papers, i.e., those who are not willing to give up, nor even thinking of giving up, in submitting their papers elsewhere. Yoshi and Tetsuya are now adopting this approach with their own individual paper submissions.

Concluding: Many Happy Returns

Coming full circle, we became teachers because we love to learn ourselves, and we are researching ourselves as much as our students. As teachers we identify with our students, and see them readily in ourselves and our research. We propose that we, our students and all humans, are socially intelligent. We realize that the more valuable feedback (Bateson, 1972; van Lier, 1996) we get from our environments, the better we cope with our realities, as do our students. Our conceptions of our personal pasts, presents, and futures affect each other and can lead us to imagine better pasts, presents, and futures. Time, as a linear, marching, measurable concept for the psyche, does not exist. Everything is always changing. The thought you had a minute ago may be totally gone or twisting into something you do not even know right now. "Now" leaps out of the present and into the past so fast that we cannot maintain it. And yet we imagine so many future "nows" that install themselves into our brains and inform us to act in different ways. To paraphrase Cervantes in *Man of La Mancha*, "The greatest madness, the greatest sadness, is to see life only as it really is, and not as it could really be. Reality . . . is greatly in need of imagination." We belong to Present Communities of Imagining and our ability to time travel and create is vastly underestimated, especially in education. We believe that when individuals sync their agency together in groups and teams, they create group agency, the social capital of socially intelligent dynamic systems. And in doing so, they invite the emergence of critical collaborative creativity.

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